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**SECURING EASTERN GERMANY AND
THE DISPOSITION OF THE SOVIET
WESTERN GROUP OF FORCES**

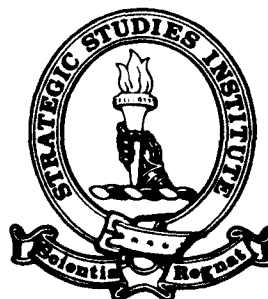
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Thomas-Durell Young

August 29, 1991

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FOREWORD

The unsuccessful August 19 *coup d'etat* attempt against Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev drew attention to the threat posed by the continued presence of the Soviet Western Group of Forces on the *sovereign* territory of the Federal Republic of Germany. After constituting an immediate military threat to Western Europe for almost 40 years, this body of forces now all but depends upon financial support from Bonn and is in the process of repatriation to the Soviet Union.

Nonetheless, the last Soviet troops are not scheduled to leave eastern Germany until the *end* of 1994. Between now and that distant date, the potential for instability should not be ignored by Western officials and defense planners. Bonn is clearly in a delicate position in regard to the orderly withdrawal of these forces without incident.

The author of this essay, Dr. Thomas-Durell Young, draws upon a wide-range of open-source material and interviews with officials in the Federal Republic to place in its proper context the disposition of these forces and the challenges faced by Bonn concerning their repatriation. Dr. Young argues that a variety of responses are possible to instances of instability; both by Bonn and the Western Alliance, depending upon the type of crisis involved, to include operational cooperation with central command authorities in Moscow.

The Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to offer this report to enable a greater appreciation of the existing situation in eastern Germany.



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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

THOMAS-DURELL YOUNG has been a National Security Affairs Analyst at the Strategic Studies Institute since 1988. Prior to this appointment, he was a country risk analyst for BERI, S.A., a Swiss-based consulting firm. Dr. Young received his Ph.D. from the Graduate Institute of International Studies, University of Geneva, Switzerland; his M.A. from the School of Advanced International Studies, The Johns Hopkins University; and is a 1990 graduate of the U.S. Army War College. He has published extensively on U.S. alliance issues with particular emphasis on Western Europe and the Southwest Pacific.

SECURING EASTERN GERMANY AND THE DISPOSITION OF THE SOVIET WESTERN GROUP OF FORCES

The August 19, 1991 *coup d'etat* attempt against Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and the unknown consequences this act eventually will have on Soviet-Western relations underscore the very sensitive nature of the Soviet military forces remaining in the former territory of the German Democratic Republic. Despite the statement issued by the hardline Communist leadership after they seized power that the Soviet government would continue to abide by all international agreements *and* that the withdrawal of the Soviet Western Group of Forces from eastern Germany would continue unhindered, for obvious reasons Bonn harbors¹ considerable anxiety over the disruptive potential these 270,000 troops could pose to the Federal Republic of Germany.

To be sure, there would appear to be little disagreement that this formerly formidable military force does not constitute the *same type* of threat to the Western Alliance that it once did. In other words, there appears to be a consensus that, even if a government in Moscow so intended, the Soviets no longer have the capability to launch a short-warning offensive against NATO from the territory of the "late" German Democratic Republic. Nonetheless, it should be recalled that the final withdrawal of the Soviet Western Group of Forces will not take place until the *end* of 1994; and between now and then, the situation in the former Democratic Republic, let alone in the Kremlin, is far from one that would support a sanguine security assessment.

What this suggests is that the failed *coup* against President Gorbachev has highlighted the often overlooked, but sensitive situation facing the Western Alliance in eastern Germany. Not only do the Federal Republic and the West need to be concerned with the "normal" problems of hosting a potentially

hostile military force on sovereign German territory, but the likelihood for ethnic, and possibly domestic political turmoil within this grouping of forces cannot be dismissed as being impossible. Thus, should these forces become internally unstable, for whatever reason, Bonn, and perhaps eventually NATO, could be faced with a politically explosive situation in trying to reestablish stability.

This assertion is supported by two factors. First, despite the unquestionably dismal state of readiness of the Soviet Western Group of Forces, until they are withdrawn completely from eastern Germany, they constitute, by their mere existence, a potential threat to the security of the Federal Republic of Germany. This in turn poses a threat to the Western Alliance, should Bonn be forced to raise the issue in NATO councils due to its inability to reestablish order with its own national forces. The nearest military force available to Bonn in responding to any disturbances in eastern Germany, the remaining elements of the former Eastern German Armed Forces, the *Nationale Volksarmee (NVA)*, is unquestionably incapable of conducting even the most rudimentary operational tasks from all reports.

In consequence, it would appear that the Federal Republic could be forced to turn to NATO for political, and possibly military, support should the state of the Western Group of Forces devolve into chaos. Finally, and potentially even more disrupting, is that should Bonn come to the conclusion that its alliance partners are unwilling to support it in its dealings with this sensitive situation in its eastern territories, this will likely result in pressure to nationalize further the Federal Republic's defense policy; a politically sensitive issue that should not go ignored.

The Soviet Western Group of Forces.

"Remarkable" is the only way to describe the sudden metamorphosis which has taken place in the Soviet Western Group of Forces. From constituting Moscow's principal offensive formation until 1989, this contingent has been reduced to all but a garrison force, dependent upon financial

transfers from a benevolent Bonn to maintain itself. From a strength of 380,000 two years ago, it now comprises approximately 270,000. By the terms of the October 12, 1990 treaty governing the removal of these forces, 30 percent are to depart annually, with the remaining 10 percent to leave in 1994.² Gorbachev's intent upon maintaining a smooth withdrawal was evidenced by the replacement of the apparently uncooperative General Snetkov by General Burlakov, who oversaw the initial and successful removal of the Soviet Southern Group of Forces from Hungary.

Notwithstanding the apparently impotent appearance of these Soviet forces, it would be a mistake to assume that they do not constitute potential risks to the Federal Republic, and therefore, the Atlantic Alliance. While one can dismiss a scenario where these forces could launch a short-warning offensive, their mere presence on sovereign German territory, particularly during periods of instability in the Soviet Union, should be a major cause for concern. One can conceive of scenarios where, for a variety of reasons, either *in toto* or in individual units, elements of the Group fail to respond to central command and control and, in the worst case, dissolve into a chaotic state. Examples of such instability could include riots, insurrections, mass desertions, mutinies, and revolts by subordinate commanders. Simply stated, it would be naive to assume that the domestic political and ethnic turmoil manifesting itself throughout the Soviet Union can be isolated from these forces until 1995. An example of the breakdown in discipline is evinced by General Burlakov's admission in March that approximately 160 *officers* and soldiers had deserted since German unification.³ Recent press reports estimate the number of deserters to have reached nearly 500.⁴ The response by the Soviets to pursue deserters and asylum seekers with special *armed* groups,⁵ in direct contravention of the German-Soviet stationing treaty, has lead to friction between the Soviets and German local officials.⁶

If the disposition of German means to respond to instability in the East were not difficult enough to manage, contemplating how Bonn would respond to such instability, let alone how Moscow would react, is even more troublesome. Obviously,

the exact form of instability taking place in the Soviet Western Group of Forces would dictate the type of German response. To illustrate, one only needs to assess the numerous considerations which would have to be contemplated. Would Bonn consider destabilizing acts by these forces to *represent* the intentions of the central authorities in Moscow, and thereby allow these instances of instability to poison the crucial German-Soviet relationship? Should a situation prove to be beyond the capability of Bonn's civil police forces, would it be wise to "escalate" the issue beyond the current bilateral context between Moscow and Bonn and request NATO's political support and possibly military assistance? If *Bundeswehr* and NATO response forces were deployed to reestablish order, should they operate in conjunction with the Soviet central authorities, or unilaterally? A complicating factor that needs to be taken into consideration is that East Germans do not harbor *fond* memories of almost 50 years of occupation by the Soviet Union and could be expected to respond strongly if Soviet individuals committed acts of violence against them. Consequently, German politicians would be under considerable domestic political pressure to hold a firm line with Moscow if a crisis developed, particularly if German nationals were involved.

Finally, the very sensitive issue of the disposition and intentions of individuals from the previously enormous *Stasi* East German secret service network needs to be considered. The Vice President of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*BfV*), Peter Frisch, stated to the press in May, "We must assume that these people [former *Stasi* members] will do everything to promote the restoration of the old conditions."⁷ The President of the *BfV*, Dr. Eckart Werthebach, has acknowledged that 400 to 500 former *Stasi* agents, who remain at large, are being used by the KGB.⁸ According to one recent German press report, KGB activities are being assisted by the Soviet Western Group of Forces.⁹

The availability of large numbers of small arms in eastern Germany (which is readily noticeable when visiting there) further complicates this delicate situation. Clearly, Bonn is aware of the precarious situation it faces in regard to

maintaining stability in its new *Laender*. For instance, the Federal Republic has gone to great pains to assist in the maintenance of stability by transferring DM 250 million *per annum* to the Soviet Union for the upkeep of the Soviet Western Group of Forces. Bonn is also facilitating the repatriation of these forces through liberal financing of new housing construction for them in the Soviet Union.

Nonetheless, problems have become noticeable. Upon unification, it was discovered that Bonn did not know the exact number and locations of Soviet bases in eastern Germany, let alone what was *in* them. A force of mobile observation units was established in fall 1990 to operate in the five new *Laender* to enable the *Bundeswehr* to locate the exact whereabouts, size and disposition of Soviet forces on its newly sovereign territory.¹⁰ An officer of one of these units (interestingly, a former *NVA* officer) was shot and wounded while observing a Soviet depot in Altengrabow in Saxony-Anhalt in April.¹¹ While expressing regret over the incident, the Chief of Staff of the *Western Group of Forces*, Lt. Gen. Kusnetsov, nevertheless affirmed that the sentry was justified in his actions.¹² The June admission by former Soviet Foreign Minister Alexander Bessmertnykh that nuclear weapons are still stored in eastern Germany, in direct contradiction of a statement made by then Soviet Defense Minister Dmitry Yazov one week earlier,¹³ has led to press speculation that nuclear weapons are stored in Altengrabow,¹⁴ and demonstrates the potentially enormous problems which are associated with the presence of these forces on German territory.

As regards bilateral political relations, ties between Moscow and Bonn have become strained in 1991. Overall, the Soviet sleight of hand in transferring CFE treaty-limited equipment to the naval infantry (which was resolved in late spring) and the crackdown on the Baltic republics have cooled what had been an increasingly cordial relationship between the two countries. While the modern day version of the "telegraph line" to Moscow remains open, frictions have also become noticeable, e.g., Moscow's letting of contracts for construction projects in the Soviet Union, to be paid for by Bonn for the repatriating Soviet Group of Forces, to Finnish and Turkish,

over German firms. Bonn was so incensed in May as to threaten publicly to block financial payments to Moscow over the lack of return of business to the Federal Republic which led to an announced compromise understanding in June.¹⁵

While admittedly these *contretemps* in diplomatic affairs are normal in any bilateral relationship, what needs to be recognized is that unlike other misunderstandings between states, in this case, the Soviets do maintain an instrument of military coercion over the Federal Republic, either actively, or passively. As regards the above mentioned housing issue, Moscow used the Soviet presence in Germany to support its position by announcing that it was delaying its withdrawal until the Federal Republic began housing construction in the Soviet Union.¹⁶ What is perhaps even more disturbing is that one could hear rumblings in early 1990 from "right-wing" military elements (now out of positions of influence, one would hope) publicly criticizing the decision to withdraw the Western Group of Forces by the end of 1994 and claiming that a much longer time frame is needed.¹⁷

Bonn's Limited Options.

At the outset, it needs to be recognized that the repatriation of the Soviet Western Group of Forces is a bilateral issue, and therefore the onus is on those two states to plan for their peaceful withdrawal. At the same time, however, the means by which Bonn could expect to respond to disturbances in the East are limited indeed. The unification of the two Germanies on October 3, 1990 resulted in the integration of 103,000 officers and soldiers of the former *NVA* into the *Bundeswehr*. This formation, now numbered at around 56,000, was under the command and control of a transitional headquarters, *Bundeswehr Kommando Ost* until July 1.¹⁸ These units are now integrated for command and control purposes into their respective service structures and remain outside of NATO, as stipulated in the Two Plus Four Treaty. As a function of the primacy of politics, units and personnel of the former *NVA* are undergoing the process of fundamental physical reorganization through the introduction of some Western equipment, and mental transfiguration through their education

of *Innere Fuehrung*.¹⁹ Funding for operations has been all but eviscerated. Unquestionably, in the long term, the decision to focus on transforming former *NVA* personnel into becoming soldiers in a democracy, at the expense of maintaining their combat competence, will be seen as having been the right decision. In the short term, however, the Federal Republic has limited its ability to respond militarily to a crisis in its new *Laender*, thereby complicating the capability for a military response. In short, it is doubtful whether former *NVA* units will be capable of conducting combat operations before 1994.

To be sure, the *Bundeswehr* in the West would be available to Bonn as an instrument of crisis management should the need arise, in addition to the Federal Border Guards (*Bundesgrenzschutz*) and other police-type units. However, even if one were to leave aside the issue of treaty infraction resulting from deploying western forces into the former German Democratic Republic during peacetime, the *Bundeswehr* itself is undergoing a difficult period of reorganization, within a severely restricted financial environment. In keeping with the terms of the Soviet-German Treaty of Final Settlement, the *Bundeswehr* is to reduce its peacetime strength from a current 515,000 to 370,000 (to include 50,000 from the former *NVA*) by 1994. This will necessitate a reduction in the order of battle of the Army to 28 from a current 48 brigades.²⁰

At the same time, severe financial restrictions on defense activities in the Federal Republic are becoming evident. For instance, the defense budget was effectively cut by 15 percent between 1990 and 1991.²¹ And, out of this shrinking defense budget, new obligations are quickly growing. In addition to rebuilding existing decrepit defense facilities in the east, the Federal Ministry of Defense (*BMVg*) must oversee and pay for the destruction of approximately 300,000 metric tons of *NVA* munitions in an environmentally sound (and expensive, to be sure) manner.²² Fortunately, the plight of the *BMVg* was recognized by the Kohl government, and additional budgetary reductions in defense have been postponed during financial year 1992, although a DM 1.5 billion reduction, if not more, is expected in 1993.²³

It should be without question that Bonn could face serious operational, let alone political challenges to respond to events in the eastern *Laender*, should a crisis develop. One option, and clearly one that would only be considered in a worse case scenario, would be to consider the employment of NATO forces. The political value of NATO making such a statement as deploying, for instance, the ACE Mobile Force (Land and Air), to eastern Germany in a crisis, would constitute a clear manifestation of alliance solidarity with Bonn, whether it were actually employed or not. However, it needs to be recalled that that particular force was developed for more or less simply manifesting solidarity and resolve, as opposed to conducting sustained operations, let alone assisting to reestablish civil order.

One would think, therefore, that the announced creation of NATO Rapid Reaction Forces would be precisely what Central Region security requires.²⁴ According to German officials, however, the choice of Britain to lead this formation may constitute a fundamental mistake. German press reports, and all but official sources, tell of defense officials complaining that London will approach the creation of this formation in too structured a manner (employing a "colonial style of leadership"), as opposed to employing more flexible task force principles. The German approach, it is alleged, would enable a task force commander to choose which forces he needs to accomplish the stated mission and, therefore, would be more responsive to the political sensitivities involved in "crisis management."²⁵ In view of the fact that Central European and particularly Balkan instability are the most foreseeable crises the Western Alliance could face in the immediate future, only time will tell if NATO will regret having decided at the May 1991 Ministerials to endorse the British, as opposed to the German, plan for the Rapid Reaction Forces.

The Lonely Central Region?

What must be considered to be one of the most peculiar results of the end of the cold war is that the West has evidently gone from making the Central Region the most over-studied area of the world in terms of strategy, operational

arrangements and concepts, to what is now one that progressively draws less and less attention. The end of the cold war has now allowed the Western Alliance the "luxury" of debating the perennial divisive out-of-area issue and engaging in acts of competitive disarmament.

What should concern the Western Alliance is that it is currently in an extremely sensitive situation apropos the continued existence of Soviet forces in what is now the Federal Republic. No doubt, alliance nations would be reluctant to contribute more than political support to Bonn in a crisis situation involving Soviet forces in eastern Germany because of the escalatory effect such an act would produce in Moscow. Concurrently, however, should Bonn conclude that its security interests are dismissed by its traditional allies, severe political repercussions could not be far off. For instance, in regard to the security situation in eastern Germany, Bonn is proscribed until after 1994 from maintaining any forces in the region which fall under NATO command and control. What this means is that *Bundeswehr* forces in the eastern *Laender* are outside of alliance command and control structures. The fact that the Federal Republic is the *only* allied country that places practically all of its armed forces under NATO command and control in wartime (outside of its territorial forces) and possesses no national war plans above corps level has been a situation favored by its allies, with their long historical memories of an efficient *Generalstab*. While German officials to date have argued in favor of maintaining the NATO wartime command and control structure alongside a proposed national command capability to be based in Koblenz²⁶ (a new command capability which will include the development of *German* national war plans), how long they will continue to do so if they are convinced their security concerns are being ignored is problematic.²⁷

Thus, the alliance should recall that the formal "ending" of the cold war needs to be postponed until the last Soviet soldier turns off the lights in his German-subsidized *kasern* and departs to a German-financed apartment block in Mother Russia. The previous Soviet threat, to be sure, has changed dramatically to one where the orderly and timely withdrawal of

Soviet forces from *sovereign* German territory ought to be one of immediate concern to the Western Alliance. Therefore, NATO should be in the position to react quickly with a wide-range of options (from political to economic, and possibly even military) as necessitated by circumstances. For one important point should not be forgotten: if Bonn concludes that it alone will have to deal with instability associated with the remaining Soviet military presence in its country, it will have no choice but to consider the option of accelerating the process of nationalizing its national defense, with all the political repercussions that would produce. And that surely must be an eventuality no one in Europe, or North America, wishes to come to pass.

ENDNOTES

1. See, *The London Times*, August 21, 1991.
2. See interview with General M. Moiseyev, former Chief of the General Staff in, *TRUD* (Moscow), March 5, 1991 in, *Joint Publications Research Service (JPRS)*-TAC-91-007, March 22, 1991, pp. 22-23.
3. See, General Burlakov's comments reported by ADN (Berlin), March 5, 1991 in *JPRS*-TAC-91-007, March 22, 1991, p. 24.
4. See *The Christian Science Monitor* (Boston), June 7, 1991.
5. See, *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), August 5, 1991, pp. 45-47.
6. See, *Berliner Zeitung*, June 15-16, 1991.
7. See, *Dresdner Morgenpost*, May 11, 1991.
8. See the interview with Dr. Werthebach in *Junge Welt* (Berlin), March 15, 1991 in, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS)*-WEU-91-091, May 10, 1991, pp. 27-29.
9. See, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, July 4, 1991.
10. This was done at the behest of Lt. Gen. Siegfried Storbeck, Deputy Inspector General of the *Bundeswehr*. See, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (Munich), May 11, 1991.
11. See, *Die Welt* (Hamburg), April 22, 1991.

12. See, *Die Welt* (Hamburg), April 26, 1991.
13. See, *The Washington Post*, June 14, 1991.
14. See, *Bild* (Hamburg), July 3, 1991.
15. See, *Die Welt* (Hamburg), May 10, 1991; and, ADN (Berlin), June 20, 1991 in, *FBIS-WEU-91-120*, June 21 1991, p. 18.
16. See, *Suddeutsche Zeitung* (Munich), June 28, 1991.
17. See comments made by Colonel Viktor Alksnis, Deputy of the USSR Supreme Soviet in, *Respeck* (Prague), February 17, 1991 in, *JPRS-EER-91-033*, March 18, 1991, pp. 1-3.
18. See, DPA (Hamburg), July 1, 1991, in *FBIS-WEU-91-128*, July 3, 1991, p. 13.
19. See, *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), March 22, 1991, pp. 82-93.
20. See, ADN (Berlin), September 12, 1990 in, *FBIS-WEU-90-177-U*, September 12, 1990, pp. 3-6.
21. See, *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), May 21, 1991, pp. 27-28; and, *Wirtschaftswoche* (Duesseldorf), March 22, 1991 in *FBIS-WEU-91-093*, May 14, 1991, pp.10-11.
22. See Erhard Heckmann's article on this subject in *Wehrtechnik* (Bonn), October 1990, pp. 76-77.
23. See, *Suddeutsche Zeitung* (Munich), July 11, 1991.
24. See, *The Washington Post*, May 24, 1991.
25. See, *Die Welt* (Hamburg), May 27, 1991; and, "Britische Dominanz bei NATO-Eingreiftruppe," *IAP-Dienst*, No.11, June 14, 1991, pp. 4-6.
26. See, Erhard Drews *et al.*, "Das neue deutsche Heer," *Truppenpraxis*, No. 4, 1991, pp. 356-367.
27. See, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 9 March 1991.